

**JIHADI GROUPS, NUCLEAR PAKISTAN,
AND THE NEW GREAT GAME**

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FOREWORD

Few nations are more central to the security of their region yet more fraught with danger than Pakistan. It is a country with deep internal schisms and with nuclear weapons, attempting to simultaneously rebuild democracy and fend off regional instability and avowed enemies. Of all the world's nuclear powers, Pakistan is the one most susceptible to some form of armed conflict or internal disintegration.

For the United States and other nations concerned with security in South and Central Asia, one of the most ominous trends has been the growing influence of *Jihadist* groups in Pakistan which feel obligated to wage "holy war" against everything that they perceive as "non-Islamic." Their objective would be a Pakistani government similar to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The danger this would pose to regional stability and U.S. interests is clear.

In this monograph, Dr. Ehsan Ahrari, of the Armed Forces Staff College, assesses *Jihadi* groups from the framework of a new "Great Game" for influence in Central Asia involving an array of states. He argues that, if this competition leads to increased violence, outside states including the United States could be drawn in. On the other hand, if the region stabilizes, it could provide solid economic and political partners for the United States. A well-designed American strategy, Ahrari contends, might help avoid crises or catastrophe.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this study to further American understanding of Central and South Asian security and provide a framework for an effective U.S. strategy there.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

M. EHSAN AHRARI has been Professor of National Security and Strategy of the Joint and Combined Warfighting School at the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia, since 1994. He also served as Associate Dean of the Joint and Combined Warfighting School from 1995-96. From 1990-94 he was Professor of Middle East and Southwest Asian Studies at the U.S. Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. Prior to joining the Department of Defense, Dr. Ahrari taught at universities in Mississippi, North Carolina, New Jersey, and Illinois. He also served as Visiting Presidential Scholar at New York University during the summer of 1979, Visiting Scholar at University of California-Berkeley during the summer of 1984, and Visiting Scholar at the Hoover Institution during the summer of 1992. Dr. Ahrari's areas of specialization include U.S. foreign and defense policy issues related to the Middle East and Central Asia, nuclear proliferation in Southern Asia, and information-based warfare, with a special focus on the Peoples' Republic of China. He is the author of eight books and dozens of articles in professional journals in the United States, United Kingdom, Norway, and, India. Dr. Ahrari has also lectured, in addition to in the United States, in a number of European, Asian and Middle Eastern countries, and at the NATO headquarters in Mons, Belgium.

JIHADI GROUPS, NUCLEAR PAKISTAN, AND THE NEW GREAT GAME

The United States and the Western world have been watching a number of developments involving Pakistan over the past few years with considerable concern. These include the emergence of Pakistan as a declared nuclear power in 1998; Pakistan's role in the continuing civil war in Afghanistan that has enabled the *Taliban* (students of religious schools) group to emerge as dominant ruler of that country since 1996; and the growing power of a militant Islamic group, the *Jihadi*, or *Jihadist* groups in Pakistan. That term is used in this study to describe all Islamist groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in Central Asia that have been single-mindedly emphasizing the primacy of *jihad*.

Even though the term *jihad* literally means "struggle," various Islamic groups have been interpreting it to mean "holy war" against everything that they perceive as "non-Islamic." It is well nigh impossible to spell out the political agenda of these groups in its entirety. A systematic study of their literature and activities indicates that these entities are primarily motivated to establish Islamist government in Pakistan and in other Central Asian countries. Such a government may not be a carbon copy of what currently exists in Afghanistan, but it will be quite similar to that.

These groups initially did not have such an ambitious political agenda. But the increasing dependence of the Pakistani government on using the Jihadist groups in its ongoing conflict with India over Kashmir, the growing political power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the continued depressed economic conditions in Central Asian countries seem to have created an environment of increasing autocratic rule, whereby the Jihadist parties in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and in at least three other

Central Asian countries—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan—are increasingly ambitious to transform the shape of governments.

In this monograph, I examine the growing political clout of the Jihadi groups in Pakistan and their increasingly powerful alliance with the Taliban of Afghanistan. I argue that this alliance is emerging as a catalytic force in its attempt to bring about political change in such countries as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, and even in the Xinjiang province of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Of course, the Islamist parties of these Central Asian countries are the vanguard for such a change. However, they are reported to be receiving ample theological education, as well as moral and material support, from the Jihadi forces of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the 19th century, the competition between Britain and Russia for influence in Central Asia was called the "great game." Today, a new "great game" is underway.¹ The thesis of this monograph is that a number of regional actors—such as Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, as well as the aforementioned Central Asian states—and great powers—like the United States, Russia, and China—will be focused on the Jihadi groups as an integral part of their respective strategic maneuvers in the new great game that is being played in the area. The Jihadist groups are not only bent on affecting the future dynamics of political stability of West and Central Asia, but, in the process, they are equally poised to harm the strategic interests of a number of regional and great powers. Thus, the nature of this struggle between the pro- and anti-status quo forces appears foreboding not only for nuclear Pakistan but also for Central Asia. If this disintegration continues, the result could be crisis, violence, or, given the possession of nuclear arms by India and Pakistan, unprecedented catastrophe. Any escalation of conflict in this region is likely to involve other regional states and the United States as well. On the other hand, if the region stabilizes, it could provide solid economic

and political partners for the United States. The stakes of this new "great game" are high indeed.

The Jihadi Phenomenon: Linkages between the Past and the Future.

The Jihadi phenomenon in Pakistan—by which I mean the emergence of Islamist groups that emphasize the primacy of *jihad* in the very strict meaning of holy war to bring about political and social changes both within and outside Pakistan—was formalized during the dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq in the late 1970s and 1980s. I emphasize the phrase "formalized" because the notion of *jihad* is as old as Islam itself. All Muslims know the general meaning of the term. In Pakistan, those who follow the writings of Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, the founder of the *Jamat-e-Islami* (Islamic party) of India, and then Pakistan, are only too familiar with the emphasis he placed on the necessity of carrying out *jihad*.² Maududi was a highly prolific writer, and his writing on Islamic theology is still regarded as a standard reference all over the Muslim world. But Maududi himself spent a lot of time practicing conventional politics.

Prior to Zia's military coup of 1977, Islamist parties of Pakistan had to compete for attention and loyalty from the population at large, along with other political parties. Even though the *raison d'être* of Pakistan was to provide a homeland for Muslims of pre-partitioned India, secular parties had a large following in that country until Zia's ouster of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977. (He was hanged on April 4, 1979.) After that, his Islamization policies served as a source of unprecedented resuscitation of Islamist parties, which saw little reason to practice the politics of accommodation or compromise.

The credit for the ascendancy of the Jihadi phenomenon does not belong solely to General Zia, however. One has to recall that the Islamic revolution in Iran took place in 1978-79. That was the first successful attempt in modern

history to establish Islamic government in a major Middle Eastern country through a revolutionary change. The new government in Iran also provided an unprecedented impetus for Islamist parties all over the Muslim world to challenge existing governments in a number of countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

Another major reason for the ascendancy of the Jihadi phenomenon in Pakistan was the Soviet Union's military invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. The United States entered the foray soon thereafter as an integral aspect of the global application of the "Reagan doctrine," whereby the administration of President Ronald Reagan was to defeat the Soviet-supported regimes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America by injecting massive military assistance and training for indigenous freedom fighters.³ The government of General Zia envisioned that war and its related American interest, presence, and military assistance as a golden opportunity to achieve strategic parity with India in conventional military arms, and also to enhance Pakistan's clout among Muslim countries. He was equally determined to ameliorate, if not eliminate, the influence of the Soviet Union and India from his immediate neighborhood. And one way of materializing that objective was to ensure that a friendly—even a puppet—regime in Kabul was established. In a moment of candor, he reportedly told journalist Selig Harrison:

We have earned the right to have a very friendly government in Kabul. We won't permit it to be like it was before, with Indian and Soviet influence there and claims on our territory. It will be a real Islamic state, part of a pan-Islamic revival, that will one day win over the Muslims in the Soviet Union, you will see.⁴

The establishment of a friendly government in Afghanistan, as the Pakistani ruling circles perceived it, had several payoffs. First, at least in principle, such a government enhanced the prospects of strategic depth for Pakistan in a war with India. While considering this point, it should be kept in mind that, given the absence of military

infrastructures in Afghanistan such as sophisticated army and air force bases, Pakistan would have had to spend large capital of its own. However, given the explosive nature of Afghan politics, no Pakistani government would plunge into massive investment of funds to develop military infrastructures—funds that it would have to acquire from friendly oil states of the Persian Gulf—unless it became very certain about the long-term political stability of a friendly regime in Afghanistan. Until then, having a friendly government in Afghanistan still carried other payoffs for Islamabad.

Second, the proximity of Afghanistan to other Central Asian states makes the former a promising territory for locating oil and gas pipelines from the latter countries. Pakistan has been too cognizant of the promise of economic bonanza that such plans hold. Third, as these Muslim states of Central Asia enhance their own orientation and knowledge of Islam, Pakistan may continue to serve as a chief conduit of Saudi activities aimed at promoting Sunni Islam. On this point, the role of Pakistani *madrassas* (plural of *madrassa* or religious schools) became enormously significant in the 1990s.

Even though Pakistani religious schools have a long history of educating the Afghans, schools in the northwestern province of Pakistan became very important institutions in the formal religious orientation of the Taliban. When the Taliban emerged as a dominant politico-religious force in Afghanistan, the Jihadi aspect of their education received in Pakistan not only became an important factor in shaping their struggle in their own homeland, but also was an important motivating force in the Taliban's cooperation with the Islamist groups of Central Asia. The madrassas of the *Jamiat-ul-Ulama-e-Islam* (JUI) of Pakistan underscored their special brand of Islamic orthodoxy that is very similar to the *salafiyya* tradition of Saudi Arabia.⁵ Another important Islamist party was the previously mentioned *Jamaat-e-Islami* (JEI). That party's insistence on Islamic orthodoxy is more

long-standing than that of the JUI. But in politicizing the Taliban, schools of the former Islamist party were very crucial.

One can only guess how far General Zia would have gone in his pursuit of Islamization of Pakistan, or whether he would have been able to control Islamist parties had he lived when the Soviet Union was ousted from Afghanistan. What is important to note is that the Islamization of Pakistan could not be stopped after his death in 1988. Pakistan's Army, as the real power behind the throne throughout the façade of civilian rule in the 1990s, did not really want to challenge the radical Islamist parties that were so assiduously serving its political objectives in Afghanistan and in Kashmir. However, since the radical Islamist parties—such as the *Harakat-ul-Mujahideen* (HUM) or *Lashkar-e-Tayba* (LT)—played such a prominent role in the Kargil skirmishes of 1999, the political clout of such parties seems to know no bounds.

The process of Islamization of Pakistan experienced an unprecedented boost as a result of the victory of the Taliban in the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan in 1996. Now the Jihadist forces of Pakistan found three frontiers to express themselves. The first frontier is the domestic politics of Pakistan itself, where they are increasing their attempts to Islamize the country. The Jihadist groups appear resentful of the fact that, unlike the Shiite clerics who successfully led the Islamic revolution and established an Islamic republic in Iran, they have not been able to do the same in Pakistan. These groups have neither studied the Islamic revolution next door in any systematic manner, nor are they informed of the types of domestic and international challenges that Iran has faced over the past 2 decades. It seems that for these groups, establishing a purist Islamic theocracy in Pakistan is an end in itself.

One of the main reasons underlying the growing politico-religious influence of the Islamist/Jihadist groups in Pakistan is the deterioration of the government-

sponsored modern educational system. In its place, children of lower middle and lower class families are attending the mushrooming religious schools that are providing free education. Graduates of these Islamic schools, though ignorant of the tools of modern education that would enable them to participate in building a modern Pakistan, are prime candidates to take up Kalashnikov rifles and become *mujahideen* (religious fighters).

On the second frontier, the Jihadist groups have already been heavily involved in the Kashmir conflict with India, with active support and approval of the Pakistani government. Given that Pakistan has decided to keep the conflict on the front burner even after 1998—when both it and India became declared nuclear powers—that decision keeps the subcontinent on the precipice of a major war, in which one cannot rule out the exchange of nuclear weapons. On the third frontier, the Jihadis are busy supplying theological education, military equipment, and training to Islamist forces from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and even in the Xinjiang province of the PRC, thereby attempting to facilitate their respective endeavors to change the existing political order.⁶ On the first two frontiers the Jihadist groups perceive themselves to be in direct conflict with the United States, but on the third frontier the scope of their confrontation also includes Russia and China.

The United States as a Focal Point of Jihadi Wrath.

In its zeal to defeat the Soviet Union, the Reagan Administration paid scant-to-no attention to the strategic implications of using the Islamist regime of General Zia as a conduit for military assistance to the Afghan mujahideen, who were themselves driven by their religious fervor to oust Godless communists from their Islamic homeland. It is a well-established fact that Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) functionaries trained the Afghan mujahideen to defeat communism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but from the

1990s and on, the very phrase "Afghan mujahid" (or its alternate, "Arab Afghan") became a generic description for the perpetrators of transnational terrorism in which the concept of *jihad* was the chief motivating force, and its targets were U.S. military personnel and assets. What went wrong?

The fact that the radical Islamists later turned against the United States was not a surprise. The Islamic revolution in Iran was taking place when the Reagan Administration and the Zia regime were involved in using the Islamists in defeating the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. The highly contentious rhetoric of Islamic Iran, condemning the United States as the "great Satan," was regularly being published during the Afghan war. As a long-time strong supporter of Israel in the Middle East, the United States had already created for itself considerable resentment in the political milieu of the Islamic and Arab world. Moreover, because it is a worldwide promoter of secularism and Western liberal democracy, the United States is perceived by Islamist groups of all coloration as a force that will always promote a political agenda that remains at stark variance with their own.

Even the Gulf War of 1991—when the United States was defending a weak Arab state (Kuwait) against the military occupation of a strong Arab state (Iraq)—turned out to be an event that created quite a bit of resentment toward Washington. The United States took a major risk by deciding to throw Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. There was no guarantee that the war would turn out the way it did, with a minimum number of American casualties. Even then the United States did not become a popular entity in the Arab and Islamic world.

To understand why the United States did not emerge as a popular actor from the Gulf War of 1991, one has to recall how divisive it really was from the very beginning, when viewed from within the Middle East. It divided the Arabs into two camps. Undoubtedly, a majority of Arab

governments supported the U.S. aim of unraveling Saddam Hussein's military occupation of Kuwait, and joined the international coalition brilliantly put together by President George H. W. Bush. However, a minority of Arab governments sided with Saddam, especially when he, as a shrewd tactic, dragged the Arab-Israeli conflict into his fight with the United States over Kuwait.

Then during the war, Saddam temporarily adopted the radical Islamist rhetoric of the Khomeini era to condemn U.S. military actions against his country. Within the radical Arab and Islamic circles, that war was envisioned as a battle between pan-Arabist or Muslim Iraq and a coalition of "Western imperialists and their Arab and Muslim lackeys." Thus, the pan-Arabists (most notably, Yemen, even though another foremost pan-Arabist nation, Syria, participated in the anti-Saddam Arab coalition) as well as the Islamists criticized the United States. But the opposition of radical Islamist groups to the United States did not solidify until much later, when the Bush administration decided to station American forces in Saudi Arabia.

The foremost source of anti-Americanism related to the Gulf War is the position that the Saudi billionaire-turned terrorist, Usama Bin Ladin, took. He has depicted the continued presence of American forces in his country since that war as an insult to Islam. Apparently, his position has found a large audience in Africa and the Middle East. On November 13, 1995, a car bomb exploded in Riyadh, killing 5 Americans. Then in June 1996, an explosion in the Khobar Towers killed 19 American military personnel. That was a clear manifestation of the growing anti-Americanism in the Islamic world in the post-Gulf War era.

Two years later in August 1998 came two more explosions in the American embassies in East Africa, in which Bin Ladin's supporters or sympathizers were allegedly involved. The third evidence emerged when, on October 12, 2000, terrorists tried to blow up USS *Cole* off the shores of Yemen, thereby causing the death of 12 American

sailors. It should also be recalled that Yemen strongly supported Iraq during the Gulf War, and resentment toward the United States in that country is reportedly still high.

Even though U.S.-Pakistani ties deteriorated after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Jihadist groups of Pakistan had no particular fight with the superpower until later. The United States, despite its checkered record of friendship with Pakistan, was generally viewed positively in official circles as well as among the general populace. The problem started in 1995, however, when the *Harakat-ul-Ansar* (HUA) kidnapped four Western tourists in Kashmir, including an American, and killed them. Washington, in turn, declared the HUA a terrorist group in October 1997, forcing it to change its name to *Harakat-ul-Mujahideen* (HUM).⁷

The conflict only intensified following the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998. In retaliation, the Clinton administration launched several cruise missiles on Sudan and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the targets were the guerrilla camps that were organized under the auspices of Bin Ladin's *al-Qaida*, a terrorist organization that was allegedly behind the African bombings. Bin Ladin himself enjoys the protection and hospitality of the Taliban. They refuse to extradite him despite sustained pressure from the United States. The intent underlying the U.S. cruise missile strike in Sudan was to destroy a plant where, according to U.S. claims, chemical weapons were being produced. Bin Ladin was also suspected of holding financial interests in that plant. He survived unhurt in Afghanistan, but a number of Pakistani Jihadis were killed, thereby making the United States "the archenemy of the Jihadists and Islam."

President Clinton's visit to South Asia in April 2000, if anything, underscored the growing rift between the United States and Pakistan. That trip was touted in India as the onset of a new strategic relationship with the United States,

thereby creating deep resentment in Pakistan. The fact that President Clinton applied no pressure on India to accept him as a mediator on the Kashmir conflict was viewed by Pakistan as proof that the Indo-U.S. ties would be detrimental to the Pakistani interests.

President Clinton not only continued to express his concern about the rising power of transnational terrorism, but during his brief stopover in Pakistan, urged General Musharraf, the Chief Executive of the Pakistani military junta, to help the United States in extraditing Bin Ladin from Afghanistan. The Jihadis of Pakistan were furious over Clinton's gall in coming to their country and insulting one of their brethren (Bin Ladin), while refusing to put pressure on India regarding Kashmir. Regardless of whether the Jihadists' conclusion about the changing role of the United States in South Asia was correct, the battle lines were drawn. The United States (or at least the Clinton administration) was to be viewed as a friend of India, and essentially anti-Pakistani in its regional predilections.

The USS *Cole* incident further implicated Bin Ladin. The fact that General Pervez Musharraf's military regime refused to serve as an intermediary for the extradition of Bin Ladin, and its rejection of the American request to allow the use of its territory for a possible snatching of Bin Ladin, created a chasm between Washington and Islamabad that only promises to widen in coming years.

Since Pakistan's emergence as a declared nuclear power in 1998, it seems that the United States has decided to deal with it largely through economic sanctions, cajoling for cooperation regarding the extradition of Bin Ladin, and publicly and privately lecturing Pakistani officials on controlling the activities of Islamist parties and returning to democracy. As the political distance between the United States and Pakistan grows, the political clout of the Islamist/Jihadi forces in that country is also escalating.

What is not clear at this point is how powerful the present government of Pakistan really is in controlling the

Jihadist forces within its own territory, or in cooperating with the United States in fighting transnational terrorism in its immediate neighborhood. There have been reports that the Pakistani Army is gradually and systematically being Islamized. And Islamization among young officers is growing. Because the United States has suspended the international military education and training (IMET) program for Pakistan for the past several years, the young generation of officers from that country has no contact with their Western counterpart officers as they come up through the ranks. This does not bode well for the prospects of having senior officers in the Pakistani armed forces with sympathy or even understanding of Western perspectives in coming years.⁸ The significance of having personal contacts was never clearer than in the one that prevailed between the former commander of U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), General Anthony Zinni, and General Musharraf, who is reported to have talked frequently with the former on a number of sensitive issues after the military coup in Pakistan. It is worth noting that contacts between American and Pakistani civilian officials in the same period were few and far between.

It seems that the Jihadi leaders are openly challenging the authority of the military government in Pakistan. For instance, Abdul Qayyum, who is a retired colonel and a leader of the Islamist party, *Tanzeemul Ikhwan*, stated, "We will besiege Islamabad and sit there until Islam is implemented. We have decided to do or die for Islam. Elections and democracy are no solution and Pervez Musharraf should realize that this is not a secular, but an Islamic army and state." Other Islamist leaders in Pakistan are going even further. Leader of Jamaat Islami, Qazi Hussain Ahmad, publicly demanded Musharraf's resignation and urged other generals to replace him since he (Musharraf), according to Ahmad, "failed on all fronts" and "jeopardized the country's security and honor."⁹

Another Islamist leader of *Harakat-ul-Mujahideen*, Fazl-ur-Rahman Khalil—who is reported to have personal

ties with Mulla Omar, leader of the Taliban movement—said in an interview on the CBS show “60 Minutes” that if the Pakistani government tries to shut his organization down, “it will not be in power for long.”¹⁰ Leaders of the JUI have vowed to force the Army to defy the United Nations (U.N.)-imposed sanctions against the Taliban of Afghanistan. *Lashkar-e-Taybah*, the largest Jihadist group fighting in the Indian-administered Kashmir, announced its resolve to undermine all peace endeavors between India and Pakistan, and it has demanded that General Musharraf grow an Islamic beard.¹¹

The Kargil conflict of 1999 between India and Pakistan has demonstrated that the Pakistani government increasingly depends on the Jihadist groups to put intense pressure on India. These groups are also becoming powerful in Pakistan because the government itself—even under military rule—has yet to establish a credible record of efficient governance. Ultimately, the proof of government’s performance is in the improved status of the Pakistani economy. Until it shows some results in this direction, the government is likely to remain on the defensive vis-à-vis the Islamist/Jihadist groups.

The irony of U.S.-Pakistan relations in the beginning of the new century is that the latter badly needs U.S. economic assistance if it is to resuscitate its very sick civil society. What is more worrisome, in the meantime, is that the continued deterioration of government-sponsored schools is creating a serious lack of future nation-builders and technocrats in Pakistan. A nuclear Pakistan should not be left at the beck and call of an Islamist group that would want to bring an end to its civil society, or to take it back several centuries in the name of Islamic Puritanism. The United States cannot long afford to continue to let the political distance grow between it and nuclear Pakistan.

Regional Ambitions of the Jihadist Groups.

Religious schools of the northwestern frontier province of Pakistan, where the Taliban received their education, serve as the current manifestation of a very long tradition. To comprehend the growing activism of the Jihadist groups in Central Asia, one has to understand that the South Asian Islamic schools and scholars have played a powerful role in the development of the Islamic heritage of Central Asia for the past 200 years. In Hanafi Islam—which prevails in South and Central Asia—the traditional *ulemas* (religious scholars) and Sufis have played a major role in shaping Islamic beliefs. The ulemas of Central Asia were sent to the religious schools of Bombay, Delhi, and Lahore during Czarist Russia and even during Soviet days. Thus, the two largest madrassas of Samarkand and Bukhara acquired their religious education essentially from the Indian subcontinent. Even when the mullahs of Central Asia were cut off from their educational travel and contacts with South Asian religious schools, literature from those schools was used uninterruptedly, since it was available in libraries and in the private collections of Central Asian mullahs.

It is important to keep in mind the tradition of Shah Waliullah of Delhi, as one attempts to understand the religious philosophy of the Taliban and their cohorts in Central Asia. One overarching characteristic of Waliullah's writing is that it validated the coexistence of strict *sharia* (Islamic law) and "spiritual sufism." However, Waliullah stripped Sufism of "practices involving the worship of saints and belief in the real union with God."¹² The orthodoxy of Shah Waliullah is also critical of the Shia sect, and it explains the strong anti-Shia attitude of the Taliban that resulted in a major conflict with Iran. It is important to underscore that this tradition has been taken to an extreme in the JUI-run madrassas—which, in turn, are extensions of the religious school of Deoband (India) that was considered the "beacon" of orthodoxy toward the end of the

19th century—of the northwestern province of Pakistan, where the Taliban received their religious education.

The Jihadi groups are becoming increasingly active and are gathering momentum in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are relatively quiet, but no one knows for how long. The growing activism, if not the popularity, of these groups is directly related to the internal political dynamics of Central Asian countries.

All five countries of Central Asia are being ruled by autocratic presidents, who have amassed enormous power through "manipulated referendums" to extend their mandate. Four of them are former communists, the fifth, Askar Alyev of Kyrgyzstan, being the exception. As authoritarian rulers, the presidents of all five republics have been least tolerant of any type of opposition, which is equated with sedition. Thus, there is no room to bring about political change. That very reality leaves the opposition groups with no choice but to resort to extra-constitutional activities, including terrorism.

All five Central Asian countries have backward economies and corrupt political leadership. One report states, "Economic health has worsened inexorably over the past 10 years. According to official statistics, production has declined by 30-50 percent in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan." In Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the production fall has been 60 percent. The same source notes, "Economic collapse on this scale is comparable with that of countries wracked by war."¹³

But that is not the end of the worsening saga of the Central Asian countries. "In education, health care, culture, and science [these countries] have been set back 20 years and more. In almost all of them, thousands of hospitals, clinics, kindergartens, schools, libraries, scientific institutions and arts institutions have been closed." Consequently, hundreds of thousands of teachers, doctors, scientists, and specialists in art have become unemployed. "Many of these losses are irreparable."¹⁴

Aside from being repressive, the political elites of all Central Asian countries are accused of funneling “tens of millions of dollars abroad to private bank accounts while their populations become increasingly impoverished.” Corruption and theft are reported to be running through the bureaucracy and “eating away at state systems.” Political repression in all the Central Asian countries has been high. But in Uzbekistan, “the repression of opposition groups has led the government to the brink of war against its own people.” The overall reaction of Western democracies to the worsening politico-economic situation in Central Asia is to turn a blind eye toward the rampant injustice. “In supporting the existing regimes, the West is not only encouraging the prospects of future conflict but alienating them from democratic sections of society in Central Asia.”¹⁵

The cumulative effects of these conditions facilitated the emergence of political extremism, including religious extremism, as an expression of protest. As they are predominantly Muslim states, Islam has had a powerful presence in these countries—more in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan than in the other three republics. The involvement of Afghanistan’s Islamist forces in the civil war of Tajikistan predates the Taliban rule in the former country. *In this sense, it should be clearly understood that the nexus between the Pakistani Jihadist groups and the Taliban is not directly responsible for initiating the activities of Islamist groups in Central Asia.*

The Islamist Parties of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan: An Overview.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are the hotbeds of Islamist parties with close affiliation and political and military support from Afghanistan. The Ferghana Valley—which straddles Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan—is an area generally regarded as the most fertile ground for the activism of the Jihadi groups. The two parties that are

known for their antigovernment activities are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*.

Perhaps the most active Islamist/Jihadist party in Central Asia is the IMU. It was established in 1987—the last few years of the existence of the Soviet Union—in the Namangan Province of Uzbekistan. Participants, in addition to the local clergy, in the premier meeting came from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia. It was during that meeting that a decision was taken to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan, ideally through parliamentary methods, but, if that was not possible, even by violent means. The IMU, under the political leadership of Tahir Yuldeshev and the military commandship of Juma Namangani, is interested in establishing an Islamic republic in the Ferghana Valley first, and then, by overthrowing the regime of Islam Karimov, in Uzbekistan.¹⁶

At the first meeting of the IMU, Tahir Yuldashev, who was only 20 then, emerged as the head. He was reportedly behind organizing numerous antigovernment demonstrations and violent acts. In 1992, Yuldashev, fearing prosecution by the local authorities, fled to Tajikistan along with a group of backers. While there, he is reported to have directly participated in combat operations in Kurgan-Tyne oblast as a member of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). In 1993, he moved to Afghanistan and emerged as the leader of the Islamic Party of the Revival of Uzbekistan, and deputy chairman of the Tajik Islamic Revival Movement. Between 1993 and 1998, Yuldashev is reported to have established a network of supporters. His movement is reportedly receiving money through drug trafficking in and around the Ferghana Valley, from Usama Bin Ladin, and from the Taliban—who are also providing his guerrillas with intensive military training. The Russian mass media accuses Yuldashev of having contacts with two Chechen guerrilla leaders, Khattab and Shamil Basayev.

Juma Namangani, leader of the military wing and number two man of the IMU, started his career in the late

1980s in the Soviet paratroop regiment in Afghanistan. In 1991, he led the failed Islamic uprising in his hometown, Namangan. Then he fled to Tajikistan, where civil war had broken out. For most of 1992, he fought in the UTO forces in Tajikistan, and then moved on to Afghanistan. During his stay there, he underwent training in the mujahideen camp. In 1998, he became one of the founding members of the IMU. Namangani participated in the Tajik civil war in the early 1990s, and has made two abortive attempts (in 1999 and 2000) in the Ferghana Valley with the "Namangan battalion" to take over political power. In 2000, Yuldashev and Namangani were tried in absentia in Uzbekistan for their alleged involvement in terrorist attacks in 1999 and 2000 in Uzbekistan and were sentenced to death.¹⁷

Namangani's band of armed guerrillas is described by Ahmed Rashid—one of the foremost authorities on the activities of Jihadi/Islamist forces in South and Central Asia—as a "multinational force" of Uzbeks, Tajiks, Chechens, Kyrgyz, Afghans, and Pakistanis.¹⁸ His militia—whose numbers are reported by different sources to be somewhere from 2,000 to even 7,000—is enjoying the sanctuary of the Taliban government in northern Afghanistan, and the financial backing of Usama Bin Ladin, at least two Jihadist groups of Pakistan, *Sipah-e-Sahaba* and *Harakat-ul-Mujahideen*, and drug lords who control smuggling routes in the three Central Asian countries.

The IMU intends to overthrow the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan. Rashid also notes, "Although the IMU has strategic aims to mobilize a Central Asian-Caucasus force of Islamic rebels and tactically to set up bases in the Ferghana Valley for a prolonged guerrilla war against President Islam Karimov," its "actions are also providing direct assistance to the Taliban offensive inside Afghanistan."¹⁹ Despite coming under heavy pressure from security forces, it has gained ground in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as in Uzbekistan.

Thus far, from the Taliban's perspective, the most impressive achievement of the IMU was to destabilize southern Tajikistan, which had served as the lifeline for the forces of the Taliban's main opponent, the Northern Alliance under the military leadership of Ahmad Shah Masood. This destabilization enabled the Taliban to defeat the Masood forces in September 2000. The IMU also concentrated on preempting all attempts of President Karimov to support another opponent of the Taliban, General Rashid Dostum, an Afghan of Uzbek origin. Russia was also counting on Karimov to help Dostum.

While the Taliban and IMU have demonstrated considerable solidarity, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan have manifested deep distrust of each other's motives in dealing with the Islamist groups. Tajikistan prefers an increased role of the Russian security forces stationed within its borders. Uzbekistan, on the contrary, continues to distrust Russia and has its own ambitions to play a dominant role in the region. Kyrgyzstan, which has its own border- and water-related dispute with Uzbekistan, is also deeply suspicious of Uzbekistan.

Aside from the IMU, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the Hizbollah (no ties with the Hizbollah party of Lebanon)—both parties subscribing to the Saudi theological orthodoxy—are spreading their Islamic message in the Ferghana Valley. The Hizbollah is political in nature and its "ideology is Islam." It intends "to carry the Islamic message in order to change the reality of the corrupt society which currently prevails in the Muslim land and to transform it to an Islamic society."²⁰ For the past several years, the Hizbollah's activities were reported to be in Uzbekistan and in the Tajik (Soghd Region) and Kyrgyz (Osh Region, where a large number of Uzbek Muslims have taken refuge as a result of persecution by the Uzbek government) sections of the Ferghana Valley. But reports of its activism are also coming from Kazakhstan, where its leaflets appeared for the first time in April 2000, and then again in October of the same year. These leaflets called on the Kazakh Muslims to

join the *jihad* movement and topple the present government.²¹

How seriously the Central Asian republics are taking the terrorist threat stemming from the activities of the IMU becomes clear by the fact that when the news of Namangani's arrival broke in January 2001, leaders of four republics—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan—secretly met and “pledged to coordinate efforts to act collectively to stop the region from spiraling into chaos and unrest and confront the Taliban.”²²

The New Great Game: Who Will Gain and Who Will Lose?

Central Asian Countries. What is the general response of Central Asian countries to the escalating activities of Jihadist/Islamist forces? Any objective coverage of the activities of Islamist parties in Central Asia is quite difficult to obtain. Most reports from Central Asia, Russia, and even the West have a uniformly alarmist tone to them—Russian dispatches are more alarmist than the non-Russian ones. There is that general portrayal of international conspiracies of Islamist parties—akin to the “international communist conspiracies” of the Cold War years—to take over Central Asia, parts of Russia, and even the northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang. Innumerable descriptions claim the ultimate objective of *all* these parties is to establish an Islamic *caliphate* comprising the aforementioned areas. The generally closed nature of these polities makes it difficult to interview authoritative sources.

The Central Asian governments have fallen back on the age-old demonizing rhetoric of the czarist/soviet era of labeling the Islamist forces as “bandits” or even “Wahabists.” “Wahabism,” so-called, is a phrase being used by the Central Asian autocrats to describe the observance of the Saudi puritanical tradition of Islam. There is a remarkable similarity in the use of this phrase in Central Asia as well as in South Asia, where it originated.

Originally, Muslims of the subcontinent used it in a derogative sense to register their differences with those puritans who condemned the Sufi tradition. Later on, the British colonial rulers of India used it to describe radical Muslim reformers who were opposed to their colonial rule.

As Olivier Roy notes, "It functioned as a pejorative label which up until 1991 had nothing to do with Wahabism in the strict sense—in other words with the puritan religious doctrine preached in Saudi Arabia." In the post-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) years, the phrase was used by the autocratic rulers of Central Asia to describe "mullahs of young intellectuals with a modern education who became the advocates of a more radical and political Islam, on the model of Muslim Brotherhood or the Afghan Mujahideen and, later on, of the Taliban." However, in the remainder of the 1990s and in this century, the phrase "Wahabist" or "Wahabism" has basically been used to dehumanize all Islamist/Jihadist forces that are also getting more and more radicalized.

In their determination to suppress the Islamic challenge, the governments of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan have been unable to make a distinction between suppressing religious activities and opposing purely political manifestations of Islam. For instance in Kyrgyzstan—where the population has been traditionally not very observant—one witnesses an outburst of religious activities in recent years. And this rising religiosity is making the government quite nervous. According to one source, 1,700 mosques, 17 madrassas, and 3 Islamic institutes have been built in that country. In the Ferghana Valley at large, 677 mosques and 4 madrassas are built just in the Osh Region, and 127 religious organizations—of which 123 are mosques, and 200 unregistered madrassas and mosques—are functioning in the Jalalabad Region of Kyrgyzstan.²³

Similarly, the Kazakh authorities are keeping their wary eyes on the rise in the number of unregistered

religious organizations, and are concerned that their country is "on the brink of getting dragged into a conflict with Islamist militants." The Council for Relations with Religious Associations reports that "half of the 2,252 organizations are unregistered. In Southern Kazakhstan Oblast (SKO) alone, 328 of the 426 religious groups operating in the area are unofficial." The mountainous part of SKO's border with Uzbekistan is believed to be "the most convenient location for IMU incursions."²⁴

Islam Karimov's regime is unanimously considered a worst-case example of iron-fist clampdown. Civil rights groups in Uzbekistan claim that the new act on controlling information that the Uzbek parliament adopted in its last session of the year 2000 "will provide the government with a mechanism for imposing a virtual media blackout during military operations." The law is to be applied to foreign as well as Uzbek reporters. Article 20 of the act, in the opinion of experts, "is so far reaching that journalists will be obliged to rely entirely on official versions of events." Mikhail Ardzinov, Chairman of the Independent Organization for Human Rights, stated, "Any attempt to accurately report the sequence of events could be interpreted as a description of operational tactics," "while the ban on the 'so-called propaganda' meant that journalists would be unable to present both sides of the story."²⁵

The Kyrgyzstan government's response to the activities of the Islamist/Jihadist forces was no less drastic. Fearing an invasion of Islamist guerrillas, that government stationed practically its entire army on and began mining the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. In addition, the security forces forcibly removed civilians living on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border "in order to facilitate government operations against the insurgents."²⁶

There is little doubt that the struggle between the current regimes in Central Asia and Islamist/Jihadist groups will continue. Political order in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan is coming under increasing

challenge. For now, governments in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, though highly repressive, are not facing serious challenge. Unless the Central Asian countries take the twin steps of improving their economies and allowing a gradual evolution of political pluralism, they will continue to be threatened by forces of change. If they fail to manage political change within their polities, they will increase the likelihood of cataclysmic change, which, in turn, will create more instability or even lead to the Talibanization of their countries.

Pakistan. Of all the regional actors that are encountering the growing influence of the Jihadist/Islamist groups, Pakistan may turn out to be either one of the significant winners or a major loser—depending upon how it maneuvers its options and deals with various regional actors—in this ongoing great game.

When Pakistan became involved in the power struggle in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, Central Asia was not even a factor, since it was then a part of the Soviet Union. One of the reasons why Pakistan became a foremost party to terminating the Soviet occupation of its neighboring state, as previously noted, was that it wanted to establish a friendly government in Afghanistan. In the process, Pakistan also wanted to permanently remove the influence of the Soviet Union/Russia and India from Afghanistan. Pakistan succeeded in achieving this objective in 1996 when the Taliban emerged as the new rulers of the neighboring state.

But Pakistan did not plan on what the Jihadist phenomenon became in the 1990s, and remains in the first decade of this century. Surely, Zia could not have imagined the power and clout that the Jihadist/Islamist groups have acquired in his own country, and the way the Taliban emerged as a ruling group in Afghanistan. Most important of all, no one could have imagined that the Taliban would use their Jihadist zeal to establish the kind of nexus they have reportedly established with the Islamist/Jihadist

groups of Central Asia, and even Islamist forces of the Xinjiang province and Chechnya.

Now the question is, will Pakistan be able to use the Jihadist phenomenon that was created in its madrassas for the fulfillment of its strategic objective, or will it become a victim of the deleterious effects of this phenomenon? In the first decade of the new century, it appears that Pakistan has not reached a point where it can no longer control events, but such a point of no return might not be too far off. There is still opportunity for Pakistan to gradually establish control over the Islamist/Jihadist groups within its own borders. At the same time it also has to nudge the Taliban group either to control the Jihadist activities of Bin Ladin affecting Central Asia, or even arrest or try him in an Islamic country. By so doing, it will do away with a major source of friction with the United States. And as long as Bin Ladin is not handed over to the United States, the Jihadist/Islamist forces of Pakistan will not be terribly upset over his plight.

There is no doubt that Pakistan's role as a kingmaker in Afghanistan has been a source of considerable political clout for it in Central Asia. Now the question is what measures Pakistan should take to properly extract benefits from that clout. One major prospect is the building of oil pipelines from Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to India to satisfy its escalating energy needs. There are two major obstacles to the development of this prospect, however.

First is the resolution of the ongoing military conflict between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance of Ahmed Shah Masood. As powerful as the Taliban group has become in controlling 90 plus percent of Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance has the military support of Russia, Iran, and Uzbekistan. Until the Taliban succeed in wiping out the Northern Alliance, they will remain vulnerable to a sneak attack from the Masood forces that may turn the tide. Especially since the imposition of the new U.N. sanctions of January 2001, there is a growing pressure on the Taliban to either score a decisive military victory over the Masood

forces or seek a compromise. Thus, it behooves Pakistan to arrange a political settlement between the two warring parties while the Taliban still maintain their position of power. Second, even if a political truce is negotiated in Afghanistan, Pakistan faces yet another obstacle in the way of materializing its desire to build oil pipelines to India, namely the resolution of the obdurate Kashmir conflict with India. In all likelihood, India will not agree to oil supplies that pass through the Pakistani territory, as long as this dispute continues to undergo periodic flare-ups.

Another potential payoff for Pakistan in Central Asia is the prospect of its joining the "Shanghai Five" group. The original members of the group are Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Its purpose is to cooperate in fighting terrorism, religious extremism, and drug trafficking in the members' territories. The real purpose of the group is to fight the growing influence of Islamist/Jihadist groups in Central Asia, Chechnya, and the Xinjiang province of China. Even though Uzbekistan is not a member, it attended the July 2000 meeting of the group as an observer. Unconfirmed reports suggest that India was also interested in becoming a member. Given the fact that it has been fighting the Islamist/Jihadist forces in the region of Kashmir under its control, India's interest in joining the group is very similar to those of its present members.

The Pakistani request to join the Shanghai Five received mixed response from some of its current members. But its close ties with the Taliban are a reality that will enable it to acquire membership. The current members hope that by letting Pakistan join the organization, they may be able to persuade the Taliban to deescalate their support of activities of the Islamist/Jihadist groups in their respective borders. At least three current members of the Shanghai Five—Russia, China, and Kazakhstan—are ready to welcome Pakistan into the organization. Pakistan, on its part, views joining the Shanghai Five group as a sure way of formalizing its ties with Russia and Kazakhstan, and also

becoming a voice for extracting diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government from its members. Undoubtedly, the Shanghai Five group will not offer the Taliban government diplomatic recognition unless the former acquires iron-clad guarantees that the latter will forego its support of the Jihadi forces in Central Asia.

Pakistan also aspires to serve as a transit route for Kazakh oil in the near future. Its military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, during a visit to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in November 2000, made clear his country's objective of serving as a transit point for the Turkmen and Kazakh oil.²⁷ During that trip, Musharraf also paved the way for direct negotiations between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan. It is worth noting that a month prior to Musharraf's visit to Central Asia (October 2000), both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan made a radical shift in their long-standing criticism of the Taliban's role in Central Asia. President Karimov stated that the Taliban do not pose a danger to Central Asian republics. Similarly, the Kyrgyz government issued a statement that the Afghan government "had the support of the majority of the Afghani people."²⁸ There is no assurance that these Central Asian republics will maintain their willingness to reach a rapprochement with the Taliban government if it does not lower its level of support for the Islamist/Jihadist forces within their borders. There is some hope that Pakistani diplomacy may be able to play an important role in softening the Taliban attitude toward the Islamist/Jihadist parties.

Russia. As in the case of Pakistan, Russia's stakes in this great game are indeed high. Since Central Asia was a part of the former Soviet Union, its successor state, Russia, has been determined to keep countries of this region within its sphere of influence. To this end, it has stationed its troops in Tajikistan to keep the Islamist forces from capturing power. Russian troops in Tajikistan also watch the borders between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan with a definite view to keeping the movement of Islamist/Jihadist forces and the drug trade to a minimum. However, on both these issues

there have been frequent reports of connivance by the Russian troops and even of their taking a role as accomplices in return for financial payoffs.

Russia is also supplying arms to Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek forces in their fight against the Jihadist forces. The chief purpose in this regard is not only to maintain a certain level of Russian influence in Central Asia, but also to keep the U.S. influence through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program at a minimum.

Another important purpose of Russia's involvement in Central Asia is to contain the activities of the Chechen separatist forces. Afghanistan has officially recognized Chechnya's independence, opening several diplomatic missions and consulates. Russia not only has couched its fight against Chechnya's attempt to break away from the Russian Federation as a war against religious extremism and international terrorism, but has claimed that "the Central Asian 'Wahabis' aim at setting fire to the entire Caucasus through their fellow believers in Chechnya and Dagestan."²⁹

Russia has also become obsessed with the Usama Bin Ladin-related political instability in Chechnya—and possibly in Dagestan—but especially in Central Asia. According to Russian reports issued toward the end of 2000, the Taliban leadership has intensified contacts with the Chechnyan separatists. The Afghan government, claims Russia, has established several Chechnyan guerrilla training camps financed by Usama Bin Ladin. "Graduates" of those training camps are being sent to the fight against the Northern Alliance of Ahmed Shah Masood, and are also reported to be present in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The usual Russian fear, bordering paranoia, on this issue was recently expressed in the words of Marshall Igor Sergeyev, who identified Afghanistan as "the international terrorist center of the world." He went on to note that from Afghanistan, mujahideen are "sent to many regions, from Kosovo to Malaysia, and to the north Caucasus as well."³⁰

After the success of the Russian forces in defeating the Chechnyan separatists in a conventional military confrontation, the conflict in Chechnya has become a guerrilla war, whereby the guerrillas have been periodically attacking Russian troops that are garrisoned in that territory, and inflicting heavy casualties. For the past year or so, Russia has been reiterating that the Chechnyan guerrillas have been receiving politico-military support and training in Afghanistan and are becoming an integral part of a pan-Islamist/Jihadist movement to take over all of Central Asia. That Russian position is in harmony with the perceptions of the authoritarian rulers of Central Asia regarding the Taliban government. Thus, a mutuality of threat perception has become an important basis for cooperation among members of the Shanghai Five, and an important rationale for Russian military assistance to Central Asian states.

Russia's options in Central Asia are rather limited, but the cost of failure is high. First and foremost, Russia has to maintain its presence and its influence in Tajikistan. However, in order to do both, it has to be careful about not being overly assertive. The presence of Russian forces in Tajikistan is an issue that incessantly challenges the sovereignty of the Tajik government. Other Central Asian states are keenly watching that development. The Russians are often accused of exploiting the weakened nature of the sovereignty of the Tajik government to ensure their long-term presence, and thereby ensuring their role as kingmakers. While that development gives Russia a temporary advantage, it might be regarded as just another example of continuing Russian imperialism in that country. Besides, if Russia as a foreign power can justify its role as a peacekeeper in Tajikistan, then on what grounds can it criticize the Taliban for interference in Tajikistan by cooperating with the Islamist/Jihadist forces?

Under the tenure of the young and vigorous Vladimir Putin, Russia is becoming increasingly intent on enhancing its sphere of influence in Central Asia. In addition, the

continued wariness of Central Asian autocratic rulers regarding the growing activism of Islamist/Jihadist groups within their borders is also helping Russia maintain its influence. It should be noted, however, that even the rising activism of Islamist forces is not enabling Russia to maintain its influence uniformly in all Central Asian states. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have stayed out of Russia's sphere of influence. In fact, Uzbekistan under Islam Karimov has its own designs for exercising its influence on Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. And Turkmenistan, as a continued evidence of conducting a neutral and independent foreign policy, has offered its good offices building rapprochement between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Russia is also concerned about the growing influence of the United States in Central Asia and its implications for Russia's strategic interests. One of the major areas of U.S.-Russian competition is the routing of the Caspian Sea oil and gas pipelines as well as the routing of oil from Kazakhstan. In the case of Kazakh oil, Russia enjoys a certain advantage because of the decision of President Nursultan Nazerbayev not to antagonize Russia. However, Nazerbayev's perspectives regarding oil are not that simple. At times, he has adopted a policy of calculated ambiguity to keep both Russian and American interests, while on other occasions he has kept both sides guessing about his next move.

Russian and American interests clashed on the routing of oil and gas pipelines from Azerbaijan. In November 1999, under U.S. pressure, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia signed a \$2.4 billion agreement with American oil companies to build a 1,000-mile-long pipeline from Azerbaijan to Georgia, and then finally to Turkey's Mediterranean port at Ceyhan (thus its name: the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline). It was apparent from the very beginning that the chief purpose of the involvement of the U.S. Government was to exclude Russia and Iran from the deal.³¹ However, since five countries bordering the

Caspian Sea—Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Azerbaijan—must be satisfied in order for any oil production deal to last, the project had a dim future from the start. Russia was under the administration of a sickly Boris Yeltsin who protested, but it took the administration of Vladimir Putin to declare that Russia had no intention of being excluded from receiving economic payoffs emanating from the Caspian Sea oil and gas. Similarly, Iran also continued its endeavors to seek bilateral deals with Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan.

While Russia and the United States disagreed on the Caspian Sea oil issue, they agreed to cooperate in applying pressure on the Afghan government to extradite Usama Bin Ladin. There were also several reports that Moscow and Washington agreed to launch combined military operations from the Tajik territory to capture Bin Ladin. Since Russian troops are stationed in Tajikistan, it was not quite clear whether such an action would have the approval of the Tajik government, or Russia would make a unilateral decision to use the Tajik territory, given the weakened nature of the present Tajik government.³²

Then in December 2000, there were also reports that Russia was going to introduce a 50,000-member military corps into Tajikistan and would conduct “preventive bombing strikes against the Taliban camps near the Afghan-Tajik border.” That plan was reportedly prepared under the direct guidance of Secretary of Russia’s Security Council Sergey Ivanov and approved by President Putin. For whatever reasons, Russia did not carry out that plan in the spring of 2001.³³

In the ongoing new great game in Central Asia, the Jihadist forces will also have a large say about how Russia’s strategic interests will be shaped. In fact, given that the fight over the future of Chechnya is far from over, the Jihadists might become important players in determining the future shape of the Russian Federation itself. Considering one radical scenario, if the Taliban were to be

defeated in Afghanistan, the role of the Jihadist forces would face a major setback, but those groups are not likely to disappear from other countries of Central Asia. Their military capacity to damage Russian interests would be temporarily curtailed under that scenario, but might not be wiped out. Considering yet another radical scenario, if the Taliban are not ousted from Afghanistan, Russia is likely to fight an uphill battle in dealing with these Central Asian groups. Russian leadership might find it very difficult to accept that it no longer plays a decisive role in Central Asia. Even under the best of circumstances of economic progress in Russia, it will remain a large but just another actor, competing to influence the new great game with other large, or not so large, but important regional and outside actors.

China. Chinese wariness over the growing activities of the Islamist/Jihadist groups has risen significantly in the past few years. The foremost Chinese concern is related to growing ties between the separatist forces in its Xinjiang province and the Taliban. There have been reports that militant elements from Xinjiang are being trained in the guerrilla camps of Afghanistan and even in Pakistan. Since these camps are not closely monitored by Pakistani intelligence, the government of Pakistan is coming under suspicion in the views of Chinese authorities.³⁴ Given the fact that China is the chief strategic partner and a major source of military supplies to Pakistan, that South Asian nation can ill afford to antagonize China on the Jihadist issue.

China has consistently maintained its distance on the Jihadist issue related to Kashmir. At the peak of the Kargil conflict, Beijing insisted that the best way to resolve the conflict was through peaceful negotiations. The PRC did not adopt that position because it suddenly started feeling soft toward India. On the contrary, China and India remain strategic competitors. There is little doubt that China draws parallels between its rule over the Xinjiang province and India's control of Kashmir. Thus, it wants a political, not a military, solution of that conflict. It should be recalled that

military clashes in the Kargil part of Kashmir were taking place when NATO was conducting an air war against Yugoslavia. That war had also resuscitated an international debate over sovereignty. According to the Chinese and Russian views, NATO's use of force was a blatant violation of national sovereignty.

Interestingly enough, India, China, and Russia were of one mind on that issue. The Chinese leaders were only too aware of the parallels between Milosovic's handling of the Kosovar minority and their own treatment of Buddhist and Muslim minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang, respectively. For that reason alone, China felt that the resolution of the Kashmir issue—which, according to the Pakistani version, was an occupation of Muslim people by Hindu India—should be accomplished through negotiations, not through military actions.

Regarding the activities of Islamist/Jihadist forces, China adopted a multi-tiered policy. The first tier was China's insistence that Pakistan take immediate measures to bring an end to guerrilla training camps not only within its borders but also in Afghanistan. As a second tier, China sent half a million dollars' worth of arms, sniper rifles, and bulletproof vests to Uzbekistan to fight Islamist forces there.³⁵ The third tier combines carrots and sticks. The carrots aspect of the policy involves Beijing's decision to open a direct link with the Taliban with a view to persuading them to cease and desist all training programs for the Xinjiang separatists. That is indeed an important wrinkle to China's approach to Afghanistan. Up until now, it has largely been approaching the problem through Pakistan. The "sticks" aspect of China's policy is that it is considering supplying military assistance to the Northern Alliance. Such a move is likely to pose China against Pakistan—since the latter is a strong supporter of the Taliban and an equally strong opponent of the Northern Alliance.

But the question is whether China will indeed implement the policy of supporting the Northern Alliance if there is no rapprochement between Beijing and Kabul. Even though China attaches a high emphasis to continued peace and stability in the Xinjiang province, its stakes in Central Asia are also quite high. It wants to keep on increasing trade with its neighbors, and wants to acquire energy supplies from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan. It has already settled border disputes with all its Central Asian neighbors, save Tajikistan. Would China jeopardize its multidimensional interests in Central Asia by getting involved in a military conflict, albeit indirectly, with Afghanistan by supporting the Northern Alliance? The Chinese will determine answers to these questions by examining how powerful the Taliban will remain as a political force in Afghanistan in the coming years, and how effective their Islamist/Jihadist cohorts will become in such countries as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

If the Taliban were to remain a dominant force in Afghanistan, then the PRC would consider adopting a two-pronged policy of negotiating with them, and also applying pressure on them through Pakistan. As long as Pakistan maintains its influence with the Taliban, China's chances of moderating the Jihadist behavior of the Taliban are greater than the ones available to Russia and even the United States. Given the significance that Pakistan attaches to its strategic ties with China, the former will not want to antagonize the latter over the Taliban issue.

The United States. American stakes in Central Asia are not as high as those of Pakistan and Russia. It is not the variety of strategic interests but their intensity—rather the intensity of one interest—that drives U.S. foreign policy toward Central Asia. Washington has become highly determined to capture Usama Bin Ladin and bring him to justice since the bombing of its embassies in East Africa in 1998. In fact, the United States tried to kill him when it fired cruise missiles on the guerrilla camps in Afghanistan in August of that year.

As previously noted, the Clinton administration applied ample pressure on Pakistan to get that country's help in extraditing Bin Ladin. However, it is largely because the United States has been talking tough to Pakistan since that country became a nuclear power in 1998, and has not spent much of its efforts on gaining cooperation through quiet diplomacy, that Pakistan has refused to serve as an intermediary between Washington and Kabul on extraditing Bin Ladin. The Taliban have steadfastly refused to extradite Bin Ladin. However, a continued involvement of Pakistan in such negotiations might have improved the chances of finding a mutually acceptable alternative, such as trying Bin Ladin in an Islamic country, a proposal the Taliban have offered many times.

When the USS *Cole* was severely damaged as a result of a terrorist attack in October of 2000, suspicion regarding the possible involvement of Bin Ladin rose high. Toward the end of that year, there were reports that the United States would use the Tajik territory to launch a special operation to snatch Bin Ladin. Russia reportedly gave full support to such a U.S. option. The Clinton administration's consideration of the use of the Tajik territory was the result of the categorical refusal of the military regime in Pakistan to cooperate with the United States in capturing Bin Ladin. Aside from a number of grievances that Pakistan has toward the United States, the growing political clout of the Jihadist forces—who consider Usama a "great Mujahid"—also looms large in that country's refusal to help the United States. However, given the significance that Moscow also attaches to capturing Bin Ladin, it is possible that this option will remain very much alive on the policy platters of Russia and the United States for quite some time.

The United States is also concerned over increased activities of the Jihadist forces in Central Asia. But aside from signing the PfP agreements with all countries of that region save Tajikistan, Washington largely left the region to Russian influence until the late 1990s. There is little doubt that Russia envisions the participation of these countries in

the PfP with concern, even though the United States has made clear that their participation in this arrangement is not a precursor to membership in NATO. There is also no doubt that the PfP remains a tool in the hands of the U.S. decisionmakers to use to turn up the heat on the Russian leadership. No country is more aware of this reality in Central Asia than Uzbekistan. Since Islam Karimov has his own ambitions to acquire a dominant role for his country in the region, he has, on occasion, talked about supplying bases to the United States. A general interpretation of such statements from Karimov is that he uses them to extract political concessions and military assistance from Russia.³⁶

Another focus of U.S. interests in Central Asia is oil. Despite the efforts of the United States to exclude Russia and Iran from the oil pipeline deals, both countries are active players in oil-related matters. In fact, toward the end of the year 2000, President Nursultan Nazerbayev was negotiating to build oil pipelines through Iran, "regarded by some specialists as one of the cheapest ways of getting Kazakh oil to Western markets."³⁷ There were also reports that Russia had successfully negotiated with Kazakhstan an increase in the quotas of oil for transit across its territory.

Under President George W. Bush, the United States has not articulated any changes in its foreign policy toward Central Asia. One expectation is that, given a general escalation of interests on the part of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to include Russia and Iran in future oil deals, Washington will closely watch these developments for now. It is apparent that the Bush administration would be interested in creating a general environment of cooperation so that Russia would soften its attitude toward America's growing interest in building the national missile defense (NMD) system. Regarding Iran, the United States has also adopted a policy of wait-and-see. Equally important, the United States is watching the growing strategic cooperation between Russia and Iran on nuclear and missile issues. China is also a player in the growing Russo-Iranian nexus,

which is likely to become a major headache for the United States in the coming years.

Even if the strategic environment of Central Asia were to become less friendly from the American perspective, the United States would still have an upper hand in the new great game. It can always increase the leverage of military partnership with the Central Asian countries through the PfP program, and thereby enhance its presence and attendant influence. It has already focused on closer cooperation with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, two major states of Central Asia. The United States also has the options of using economic assistance and military weapons as tools to enhance its clout in the area. Given the powerful reputation for quality of U.S. arms worldwide, Central Asian countries would gleefully welcome escalated military assistance from Washington, if the current administration were to make such a decision.

Regarding all these options in Central Asia, the United States has to proceed from the assumption that the present autocratic rulers will manage to stay in power. If one or more presidents of these republics is assassinated or overthrown, then it is anyone's guess as to how much deterioration in the strategic environment there would follow, and how much worse this environment could get before it became better from the perspective of the United States.

Conclusions.

The Jihadi phenomenon that is escalating in the area that covers Pakistan to Central Asia may best be handled by simultaneously introducing programs of economic development and managed political pluralism. But where should one start such programs? More to the point, who is going to persuade the autocrats of Central Asia to introduce political pluralism on an incremental basis? All of them want to be life-long rulers; only some are more blunt about it than others. What about Afghanistan, whose rulers are

establishing, almost on a regular basis, their own interpretations of Islamic state enlightenment (or the lack thereof!), justice, treatment (or ill-treatment) of women, and civility?

A good starting point for economic development ought to be Pakistan. Large numbers of Pakistanis are not happy with the rising tide of Jihadi tendencies and obscurantism in their country. They will indeed welcome the strengthening of civil society, under which half-educated mullahs will not attempt to take over the government. The growing conflict in Pakistan is the outcome of the failure of the government to implement policies that will create a modern, industrial country. The abysmal failure of the modern education system has enabled the emergence of religious schools, where extremism is being taught, as if it were the flip side of Islam. The historical reality is quite the contrary. Sadly, these mullahs are ignorant of their own religious heritage that has so heavily emphasized tolerance and moderation. For the sake of peace, civility, and regional stability, the international community should do everything to help modernize the civilian sectors of the Pakistani economy and continue to engage that country in a variety of international political and economic institutions. An internationally engaged nuclear Pakistan will not become a nuclear pariah.

A good way to fight religious extremism in Central Asia is to persuade the autocratic rulers to lower the level of political repression—which, in reality, is the exercise of extremism by the government—that they are perpetrating in the name of fighting “Wahabism.” The most difficult part of this proposition is the question of who will persuade them to do so. Even the United States—as much as it remains a strong proselytizer for political moderation and democracy—treads gingerly regarding its advocacy of human rights in Central Asia. Therein lies the rub.

If the United States will not insist that the autocrats of Central Asia lighten up on their people, no other country

will. Major European states have been uncritically receptive to the propaganda emanating from the capitals of Central Asian states about how Islamists/Jihadists will take over their part of the world if they are not wiped out by whatever measures these governments deem necessary. Looking for moderate solutions from Russia and China will be a fruitless exercise. Just look at how brutal they are with their own religious and ethnic minorities. The rest of the Muslim states have not shown any ability to lead on this issue. They have largely stayed on the sidelines. Besides, there are not many Muslim states that have established trailblazing examples of political moderation. In the final analysis, the burden of leadership in finding politico-economic solutions to the growing religious extremism in the South-Central Asia falls, once again, on the United States.

Afghanistan has been proving itself to be *sui generis*. Thus, the only way to deal with the Taliban is by using the good offices of Pakistan. The latter is more than just a neighbor. It has been very effective in enabling the Taliban to maintain their military control of Afghanistan. If the Pakistani support were gone, then the Taliban as a political force might not last long. But, given that there is a powerful religious base of support for the Taliban within Pakistan, the approach of the international community (or more specifically, the United States) should NOT be aimed at destroying the Taliban as a ruling force. Rather, it should act with a view to moderating their behavior. That may be done only by creating sufficient incentives for Pakistan to apply behind-the-scenes pressure on Afghanistan to abandon its support of the Jihadist forces in Central Asia.

Recommendations for the United States.

As the administration of President George W. Bush is busy creating or recreating its strategy toward different regions of the world, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia deserve special attention. Even though the American

stakes in Central Asia are not as high as those of Pakistan and Russia, the United States should not stand by and watch political explosions in South and Central Asia which are likely if the current economic and political deterioration in the region continues.

During the Clinton presidency, the United States did not assign a high priority to those regions. Regarding South Asia, the last administration had a change of heart when Clinton visited the region in the waning years of his presidency. Then, without seriously considering the implications of a major policy change on the region, President Clinton decided to engage India at the expense of “punishing” Pakistan for ousting democracy, for that country’s support for Islamist radical forces during the Kargil conflict in Kashmir, for its refusal to clamp down Islamic hardliners within its borders, and for its support of the Taliban. The result of that shortsighted approach to South Asia has been a growing chasm between the United States and Pakistan.

The Bush administration should develop a strategy incorporating both South and Central Asia as those regions become increasingly intertwined. That strategy should abandon the zero-sum approach that the Clinton administration had initiated during its last years in office—preferring India at the expense of Pakistan. Instead, the United States ought to explicitly state that it intends to engage both countries. As declared nuclear powers, and because of their proximity to Central Asia, they are very important to America’s strategic approach toward South and Central Asia. In addition, the significance of Pakistan for the prospects of peace and stability in Central Asia will only increase in the coming years, especially if the Taliban regime stays in power in Afghanistan. Pakistan will continue to serve as an intellectual center of Islamic radicalism in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Thus, if the United States wants to diminish the violence associated with such radicalism, it should engage Pakistan with a view

to persuading its government to reign in Islamic radicals within its own borders.

The third element of U.S. strategy should be approaching Afghanistan through the good offices of Pakistan, since the Taliban consider the latter as their only credible ally. But even before approaching Pakistan, the United States has to make another difficult choice: to be willing to have Usama Bin Ladin tried in an Islamic state on charges of sponsoring transnational terrorism—including terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassies in East Africa and on the USS *Cole*. This will be highly controversial, but it is not without precedent. After all, the United States has accepted a similar option when the two Libyans accused of carrying out the Lockerbie terrorist incident were tried in Holland. Since Afghanistan has expressed its willingness to try Bin Ladin in an Islamic country, the United States will break a major impasse in its ties with Pakistan and Afghanistan by agreeing to such a trial. Once this is done, the process of engaging Pakistan and Afghanistan should evolve incrementally and deliberately; and it would not encounter many major hurdles. The ultimate objectives of U.S.-Pakistan-Afghanistan rapprochement ought to be arresting the growing spirals of Islamic radicalism, fighting the drug trade, and controlling the spread of small arms that are becoming so deadly in the intermittent outbreak of ethnic clashes and anti-government violent incidents.

The fourth characteristic of the U.S. strategy toward Central Asia ought to be a two-track emphasis on creating a multilateral forum for providing economic assistance and persuading the existing regimes to allow the evolution of political pluralism. In pursuing those tracks of the U.S. strategy, the Bush administration should actively seek the support and involvement of Japan and Europe. Such an emphasis would take that region a long way toward economic prosperity and political moderation.

Even though in the Clinton era the United States paid attention to Central Asia only sporadically—through its

involvement in the oil and gas pipeline issues and regarding the capture or extradition of Usama Bin Ladin—the priorities of the new administration toward South and Central Asia must change. As Russia increasingly asserts itself under the youthful leadership of President Vladimir Putin in different regions of the world, Russo-American ties, especially in Central Asia, are likely to become competitive. The significance of that competition also increases when one considers the growing strategic involvement of the PRC in Central Asia. Since all indicators point toward Sino-American relations remaining competitive, that becomes one more reason why the United States should develop a proactive strategy toward South and Central Asia.

South and Central Asia constitute a part of the world where a well-designed American strategy might help avoid crises or catastrophe. The U.S. military would provide only one component of such a strategy, and a secondary one at that, but has an important role to play through engagement activities and regional confidence-building. Insecurity has led the states of the region to seek weapons of mass destruction, missiles, and conventional arms. It has also led them toward policies which undercut the security of their neighbors. If such activities continue, the result could be increased terrorism, humanitarian disasters, continued low-level conflict and potentially even major regional war or a thermonuclear exchange. A shift away from this pattern could allow the states of the region to become solid economic and political partners for the United States, thus representing a gain for all concerned.

ENDNOTES

1. Use of the phrase "great game" to refer to the 19th century strategic competition in Central Asia between Britain and Russia is attributed to Rudyard Kipling. The analogy has again become useful and has been used, *inter alia*, in M. E. Ahrari with James Beal, *The New Great Game in Muslim Central Asia*, McNair Paper 47, Washington, DC: National Defense University Institute for National Strategic

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2. For a superb overview of Maududi's writings, see Khurshid Ahmad and Zafar Ishaq Ansari, eds., *Islamic Perspectives*, London, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1979.

3. Ted Galen Carpenter, "The Unintended Consequence of Afghanistan," *World Policy Journal*, Spring 1994, pp.76-87. For application of the concept of the unintended consequences of U.S. policy during the Cold War to Asia generally, see Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, New York: Henry Holt, 2000.

4. Carpenter, p. 80.

5. The JUI established these schools in the northwestern frontier province of Pakistan in 1947 for purely religious education. However, the outlook of this party changed when its leader, Maulana Ghulam Ghaus Hazravi, turned it into a political party. The current leader of the JUI is Maulana Sami-ul-Haq, whose *Darul-Uloom Haqqaniya* served as a major educational institution for the Taliban leadership.

6. Based on author's conversation with sources knowledgeable on the religious groups. Also see M. Ehsan Ahrari, "China, Pakistan, and the Taliban Syndrome," *Asian Survey*, July/August 2000, pp. 658-671; and Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 82-94, 183-195.

7. HUA was founded in 1993 in Pakistan, and is led by Maulana Fazl-ur-Rahman Khalil. Its main sponsors are reported to be the Pakistani intelligence service, ISI, JUI, *Tableegh-ul-Islami*, and *Hizb-ul-Islami*, Yunus Khalis faction. The HUA is reported to have close working relations with the Somalian *Ittihad-e-Islami*, and reported to have several activists and supporters in the United Kingdom. For details, see "Religious Leaders Hail Musharraf's Views on Terrorism, Jihad," *Ausaf*, in Urdu, January 27, 2000.

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11. *Ibid.*

12. Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia*, New York: New York University Press, 1997, p. 145.

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15. *Ibid.*

16. Leonid Moskalev, "Drama Entitled 'Jihad': Fighters for Faith With Assault Rifles in Their Hands and Knives Under Their Belts," *Moscow Nezavisimaya Gezeta* in Russian, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)*, electronic version, August 18, 2000.

17. *Ibid.*

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